

BOOKS NOVEMBER 7, 2016 ISSUE

THE CASE AGAINST DEMOCRACY

If most voters are uninformed, who should make decisions about the public's welfare?

By **Caleb Crain**



Voter ignorance has worried political philosophers since Plato.

Roughly a third of American voters think that the Marxist slogan “From each according to his ability to each according to his need” appears in the Constitution. About as many are incapable of naming even one of the three branches of the United States government. Fewer than a quarter know who their senators are, and only half are aware that their state has two of them.

Democracy is other people, and the ignorance of the many has long galled the few, especially the few who consider themselves intellectuals. Plato, one of the earliest to see democracy as a problem, saw its typical citizen as shiftless and flighty:

Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he's idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy.

It would be much safer, Plato thought, to entrust power to carefully educated guardians. To keep their minds pure of distractions—such as family, money, and the inherent pleasures of naughtiness—he proposed housing them in a eugenically supervised free-love compound where they could be taught to fear the touch of gold and prevented from reading any literature in which the characters have speaking parts, which might lead them to forget themselves. The scheme was so byzantine and cockamamie that many suspect Plato couldn't have been serious; Hobbes, for one, called the

idea “useless.”

A more practical suggestion came from J. S. Mill, in the nineteenth century: give extra votes to citizens with university degrees or intellectually demanding jobs. (In fact, in Mill’s day, select universities had had their own constituencies for centuries, allowing someone with a degree from, say, Oxford to vote both in his university constituency and wherever he lived. The system wasn’t abolished until 1950.) Mill’s larger project—at a time when no more than nine per cent of British adults could vote—was for the franchise to expand and to include women. But he worried that new voters would lack knowledge and judgment, and fixed on supplementary votes as a defense against ignorance.

In the United States, élites who feared the ignorance of poor immigrants tried to restrict ballots. In 1855, Connecticut introduced the first literacy test for American voters. Although a New York Democrat protested, in 1868, that “if a man is ignorant, he needs the ballot for his protection all the more,” in the next half century the tests spread to almost all parts of the country. They helped racists in the South circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment and disenfranchise blacks, and even in immigrant-rich New York a 1921 law required new voters to take a test if they couldn’t prove that they had an eighth-grade education. About fifteen per cent flunked. Voter literacy tests weren’t permanently outlawed by Congress until 1975, years after the civil-rights movement had discredited them.

Worry about voters’ intelligence lingers, however. Mill’s proposal, in particular, remains “actually fairly formidable,” according to David Estlund, a political philosopher at Brown. His 2008 book, “Democratic Authority,” tried to construct a philosophical justification for democracy, a feat that he thought could be achieved only by balancing two propositions: democratic procedures tend to make correct policy decisions, and democratic procedures are fair in the eyes of reasonable observers. Fairness alone didn’t seem to be enough. If it were, Estlund wrote, “why not flip a coin?” It must be that we value democracy for tending to get things right more often than not, which democracy seems to do by making use of the information in our votes. Indeed, although this year we seem to be living through a rough patch, democracy does have a fairly good track record. The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has made the case that democracies never have famines, and other scholars believe that they almost never go to war with one another, rarely murder their own populations, nearly always have peaceful transitions of government, and respect human rights more consistently than other regimes do.

Still, democracy is far from perfect—“the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” as Churchill famously said. So, if we value its power to make good decisions, why not try a system that’s a little less fair but makes good decisions even more often? Jamming the stub of the Greek word for “knowledge” into the Greek word for “rule,” Estlund coined the word “epistocracy,” meaning “government by the knowledgeable.” It’s an idea that “advocates of democracy, and other enemies of despotism, will want to resist,” he wrote, and he counted himself among the resisters. As a purely philosophical matter, however, he saw only three valid objections.

First, one could deny that truth was a suitable standard for measuring political judgment. This sounds extreme, but it’s a fairly common move in political philosophy. After all, in debates over contentious issues, such as when human life begins or whether human activity is warming the planet, appeals to the truth tend to be incendiary. Truth “peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate,” Hannah Arendt pointed out in this magazine, in 1967, “and debate constitutes the very essence of political life.” Estlund wasn’t a relativist, however; he agreed that politicians should refrain from appealing to absolute truth, but he didn’t think a political theorist could avoid doing so.

The second argument against epistocracy would be to deny that some citizens know more about good government than others. Estlund simply didn’t find this plausible (maybe a political philosopher is professionally disinclined to). The third and final option: deny that knowing more imparts political authority. As Estlund put it, “You might be right, but who

made you boss?”

It’s a very good question, and Estlund rested his defense of democracy on it, but he felt obliged to look for holes in his argument. He had a sneaking suspicion that a polity ruled by educated voters probably *would* perform better than a democracy, and he thought that some of the resulting inequities could be remedied. If historically disadvantaged groups, such as African-Americans or women, turned out to be underrepresented in an epistocratic system, those who made the grade could be given additional votes, in compensation.

By the end of Estlund’s analysis, there were only two practical arguments against epistocracy left standing. The first was the possibility that an epistocracy’s method of screening voters might be biased in a way that couldn’t readily be identified and therefore couldn’t be corrected for. The second was that universal suffrage is so established in our minds as a default that giving the knowledgeable power over the ignorant will always feel more unjust than giving those in the majority power over those in the minority. As defenses of democracy go, these are even less rousing than Churchill’s shruggie.

“Yours was the blue Prius with the two stoners passed out in back, right?”

In a new book, “Against Democracy” (Princeton), Jason Brennan, a political philosopher at Georgetown, has turned Estlund’s hedging inside out to create an uninhibited argument *for* epistocracy. Against Estlund’s claim that universal suffrage is the default, Brennan argues that it’s entirely justifiable to limit the political power that the irrational, the ignorant, and the incompetent have over others. To counter Estlund’s concern for fairness, Brennan asserts that the public’s welfare is more important than anyone’s hurt feelings; after all, he writes, few would consider it unfair to disqualify jurors who are morally or cognitively incompetent. As for Estlund’s worry about demographic bias, Brennan waves it off. Empirical research shows that people rarely vote for their narrow self-interest; seniors favor Social Security no more strongly than the young do. Brennan suggests that since voters in an epistocracy would be more enlightened about crime and policing, “excluding the bottom 80 percent of white voters from voting might be just what poor blacks need.”

Brennan has a bright, pugilistic style, and he takes a sportsman’s pleasure in upsetting pieties and demolishing weak logic. Voting rights may happen to signify human dignity to us, he writes, but corpse-eating once signified respect for the dead among the Fore tribe of Papua New Guinea. To him, our faith in the ennobling power of political debate is no more well grounded than the supposition that college fraternities build character.

Brennan draws ample evidence of the average American voter’s cluelessness from the legal scholar Ilya Somin’s “Democracy and Political Ignorance” (2013), which shows that American voters have remained ignorant despite decades of rising education levels. Some economists have argued that ill-informed voters, far from being lazy or self-sabotaging, should be seen as rational actors. If the odds that your vote will be decisive are minuscule—Brennan writes that “you are more likely to win Powerball a few times in a row”—then learning about politics isn’t worth even a few minutes of your time. In “The Myth of the Rational Voter” (2007), the economist Bryan Caplan suggested that ignorance may even be gratifying to voters. “Some beliefs are more emotionally appealing,” Caplan observed, so if your vote isn’t likely to do anything why not indulge yourself in what you want to believe, whether or not it’s true? Caplan argues that it’s only because of the worthlessness of an individual vote that so many voters look beyond their narrow self-interest: in the polling booth, the warm, fuzzy feeling of altruism can be had cheap.

Viewed that way, voting might seem like a form of pure self-expression. Not even, says Brennan: it’s multiple choice, so hardly expressive. “If you’re upset, write a poem,” Brennan counselled in an earlier book, “The Ethics of Voting” (2011). He was equally unimpressed by the argument that it’s one’s duty to vote. “It would be bad if no one farmed,” he wrote, “but that does not imply that everyone should farm.” In fact, he suspected, the imperative to vote might be even weaker

than the imperative to farm. After all, by not voting you do your neighbor a good turn. “If I do not vote, your vote counts more,” Brennan wrote.

Brennan calls people who don’t bother to learn about politics hobbits, and he thinks it for the best if they stay home on Election Day. A second group of people enjoy political news as a recreation, following it with the partisan devotion of sports fans, and Brennan calls them hooligans. Third in his bestiary are vulcans, who investigate politics with scientific objectivity, respect opposing points of view, and carefully adjust their opinions to the facts, which they seek out diligently. It’s vulcans, presumably, who Brennan hopes will someday rule over us, but he doesn’t present compelling evidence that they really exist. In fact, one study he cites shows that even people with excellent math skills tend not to draw on them if doing so risks undermining a cherished political belief. This shouldn’t come as a surprise. In recent memory, sophisticated experts have been confident about many proposals that turned out to be disastrous—invading Iraq, having a single European currency, grinding subprime mortgages into the sausage known as collateralized debt obligations, and so on.

How would an epistocracy actually work? Brennan is reluctant to get specific, which is understandable. It was the details of utopia that gave Plato so much trouble, and by not going into them Brennan avoids stepping on the rake that thwacked Plato between the eyes. He sketches some options—extra votes for degree holders, a council of epistocrats with veto power, a qualifying exam for voters—but he doesn’t spend much time considering what could go wrong. The idea of a voter exam, for example, was dismissed by Brennan himself in “The Ethics of Voting” as “ripe for abuse and institutional capture.” There’s no mention in his new book of any measures that he would put in place to prevent such dangers.

Without more details, it’s difficult to assess Brennan’s proposal. Suppose I claim that pixies always make selfless, enlightened political decisions and that therefore we should entrust our government to pixies. If I can’t really say how we’ll identify the pixies or harness their sagacity, and if I also disclose evidence that pixies may be just as error-prone as hobbits and hooligans, you’d be justified in having doubts.

While we’re on the subject of vulcans and pixies, we might as well mention that there’s an elephant in the room. Knowledge about politics, Brennan reports, is higher in people who have more education and higher income, live in the West, belong to the Republican Party, and are middle-aged; it’s lower among blacks and women. “Most poor black women, as of right now at least, would fail even a mild voter qualification exam,” he admits, but he’s undeterred, insisting that their disenfranchisement would be merely *incidental* to his epistocratic plan—a completely different matter, he maintains, from the literacy tests of America’s past, which were administered with the *intention* of disenfranchising blacks and ethnic whites.

That’s an awfully fine distinction. Bear in mind that, during the current Presidential race, it looks as though the votes of blacks and women will serve as a bulwark against the most reckless demagogue in living memory, whom white men with a college degree have been favoring by a margin of forty-seven per cent to thirty-five per cent. Moreover, though political scientists mostly agree that voters are altruistic, something doesn’t tally: Brennan concedes that historically disadvantaged groups such as blacks and women seem to gain political leverage once they get the franchise.

Like many people I know, I’ve spent recent months staying up late, reading polls in terror. The flawed and faulty nature of democracy has become a vivid companion. But is democracy really failing, or is it just trying to say something?

Political scientists have long hoped to find an “invisible hand” in politics comparable to the one that Adam Smith described in economics. Voter ignorance wouldn’t matter much if a democracy were able to weave individual votes into collective political wisdom, the way a market weaves the self-interested buy-and-sell decisions of individual actors into a